

PITFALLS IN USING INTERNET REFERENCES

I was pleased to read Slater and Zimmerman's fine brief report on problems associated with health-related Web site listings for the public.¹ That report reinforces and complements my contention, published recently, that similar obstacles exist in the use of Internet references for scientific articles.²

Further testimony about electronic references was given several years ago by Frank Davidoff, MD, in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, of which he was editor at the time. He concluded, "Even—perhaps especially—in the new information age, a scientific discovery does not exist until it is safely in print."^{3(p58)}

All of this emphasizes the points made by Slater and Zimmerman—that there are pitfalls in using Internet references and that extreme care must be taken in accepting them or quoting them. My follow-up article⁴ offers some suggestions to aid authors in being accurate; however, this is no panacea. Much study—by both electronic advocates and electronic skeptics—will be needed to try to eliminate recurring difficulties in this area and to protect all of us.

However, none of us has addressed the greater danger: that electronic information may be accepted as infallible by professionals or lay individuals, who might then base actual human therapy on these reports—with possible dire consequences. Therein lies a potentially major public health problem, and perhaps some medicolegal ones also.

Thanks to Slater and Zimmerman for shedding more light on this problem. ■

Arnold Melnick, DO, MSc

About the Author

The author is with the Department of Pediatrics, College of Osteopathic Medicine, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Arnold Melnick, DO, MSc, 3675 N Country Club Dr # 2206, Aventura, FL 33180-1709 (e-mail: amelnick@nova.edu).

References

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